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RECIFE REPORT 21

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TO:

Ambassy RIO DE JANEIRO

Date: June 10, 1970

FROM:

Amconsul RECIFE

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT:

National Conference of Brazilian Bishops on
Torture Issue

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PARTICIPANTS: Dom Jose Lamartine SOARES, Auxiliary
Bishop at Recife
W. Douglas McLain Jr., Political Officer
Frank M. Ravndal, Political Officer, Office
of Brazilian Affairs

TIME & PLACE: June 2, 1970, Dom Lamartine's Office

1. Dom Lamartine said he had attended the May, 1970 meeting of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops at Brasilia and had participated actively in the debate on whether to issue a statement expressing concern over the Brazilian authorities' use of torture. He said the debate over making a statement concerned the wisdom of irritating the regime and not the question of whether or not torture was being used. He viewed the vote on the motion to officially express concern - only 22 opposed among about 200 bishops attending - as an accurate reflection of the Brazilian clergy's attitude on the subject.
2. Dom Lamartine said that, during the conference, the bishops met with Minister of Justice Alfredo BUZARD to discuss the torture issue. After a considerable time spent evading questions (and accusations) by the bishops, Buzard, according to Dom Lamartine, flatly denied that any torture had ever been applied to prisoners in Brazil. Since Dom Lamartine estimated about ninety of the bishops have received, and accepted as true, statements of persons who claim they have been tortured by the Brazilian authorities, Buzard's denial destroyed his credibility with the Brazilian Catholic Church hierarchy.
3. When questioned on the validity of claims of torture by Brazilian authorities, Dom Lamartine admitted that it would be difficult if not impossible to prove a case of torture in a Brazil court of law. However, he recalled a hospital interview

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Authority: 43265 By:
Amanda Weimer Date:
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*This accords with
an understanding from
conservative Brazilian allies*

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more than a year ago with a Recife student who had leaped from a third story window allegedly to escape further torture by state police (DOPS). "I cannot prove he was tortured, but I am morally certain that he was."

4. COMMENT: Dom Lamartine works closely with controversial Dom Helder CAMARA, Archbishop of Recife and Olinda and a leader of the progressive wing of the Brazilian Church. Dom Lamartine is equally as progressive as Dom Helder and, perhaps because he is calm and apparently rational where Dom Helder is often dramatic and wildly inaccurate, Dom Lamartine often presents the case of the progressive wing more effectively than his ecclesiastical superior. Instead of moral indignation, Dom Lamartine's attitude toward what he regards as a patent falsehood by Minister Buzaid was one of wry, resigned disgust as if nothing else could have been expected.

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Drafted by: FOL:WDMcLainJr:pgd

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TO:

Amembassy RIO DE JANEIRO Date: June 10, 1970

FROM:

Amconsul RECIFE

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT:

Project for "Invasion" of Church-owned Lands by Peasants

PARTICIPANTS:

Father Paulo CRESPO, Coordinator of Pernambuco Rural Orientation Service (SORPE)
W. Douglas McLain Jr., Political Officer
Frank M. Ravndal, Political Officer, Office of Brazilian Affairs

DATE & PLACE: June 2, 1970, Father Crespo's Office

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1. During a general discussion of rural labor union problems and (in Father Crespo's view) the decreasing possibilities for significant progress in land reform, Father Crespo said he was investigating the amount of tillable land owned by the Catholic Church in Brazil. He said he believed the Church owned a substantial amount of land suitable for farming but that there were no known nationwide statistics indicating their extent and location.

2. Father Crespo said once he had information about church lands in the Northeast he intended to conduct a campaign to "invade" them with landless peasants who would appropriate the land to their own use and farm it. He said he was out of patience with "negative" progress toward agrarian reform and thought it was time to take decisive action. He indicated he believed the Church would be morally unable to protest the invasion of its lands for such a purpose. "Anyway, it is time for the Church to take a stand on this issue, define itself, and commit itself."

3. As usual, Father Crespo spoke without visible emotion. He gave no indication of when he expected to launch such a movement or whether it would be national, regional or local. He did say he hoped to occupy the maximum extent of land, in widely dispersed areas as simultaneously as possible.

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4. COMMENT: Father Crespo was one of the prime movers of the Church-directed effort to organize rural labor unions before the 1964 Revolution. Today, he is one of the most influential members of this greatly weakened movement and one who has been in the forefront of those demanding land reform as the basis for a viable rural union structure. He is tough, usually realistic, and has taken radical approaches to problems in the past. He seems more dedicated to the rural union movement and the peasants than to the Church and his vocation as a priest.

5. It is difficult to assess how seriously Father Crespo may be contemplating a land invasion scheme that can only lead to confrontation with the military or police authorities, endanger the rural union movement, possibly cause friction between the Church and unions and place his own position as a union leader and a priest in jeopardy. His belief that the Church might not react openly and officially against an invasion of its lands is quite possibly correct. However, Father Crespo cannot ignore the fact that (1) he will persuade a significant number of peasants to participate only with great difficulty, (2) official union support is unlikely, and (3) in the absence of an official Church complaint, the military and police authorities are almost certain to quash any invasions of lands unilaterally. If, in fact, Father Crespo moves toward a Church land invasion scheme, the realities of the situation in the Northeast and his own position should strongly suggest to him the advisability of a symbolic invasion of one or two plots of Church land.

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

INFO : RIO DE JANEIRO

AMEMBASSY BRASILIA

June 16, 1970

11th General Assembly of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB), Brasilia, May 17/27, 1970
Brasilia's 166, Rio's 3625, Brasilia's 173 repeated to Washington as Rio's 3739

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Summary

The National Conference of Bishops of Brazil met in Brasilia for eleven days in May. Although the main subjects on the agenda concerned liturgical matters, education of the clergy, and internal reforms, public interest was focused on the question of torture. After much debate among the bishops and lobbying by the government against a critical statement, the CNBB overwhelmingly approved the "Pastoral of Brasilia." The document, which condemns violence and torture in any form, is carefully worded to balance critical statements with explanations and with praise for the government in certain areas. The government's reaction to the "Pastoral" was to encourage favorable comment on its positive aspects and to make little or no comment on its critical sections. The conference and the resulting document indicate a desire on the part of the Church and the government for dialogue and cooperation. The conference ended with the Church seemingly united, although criticism by liberal elements may revive if the COB does not take positive measures to prevent torture.

The Pastoral Letter

1. The publication of the Pastoral Letter of Brasilia at the end of the bishops' conference has generated considerable comment and discussion. Although the document, approved at the conference by a vote of 159 to 21 with two abstentions, deals mainly with matters directly related to ecclesiastical questions, it is the last section, "Aspects of National Life," that has drawn major attention in the press and Group 3 - Downgraded at 12-year intervals
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government circles. This part focuses on torture, violence, genocide, political prisoners, economic development, and human values.

2. The carefully worded document represents an effort on the part of the bishops to put together a statement acceptable to a majority in which they speak out on questions which clearly concern them without unduly offending the government with strong attacks and criticisms. They clearly wished to avoid any step which would foreclose dialogue with the government. The Pastoral is also an effort to deal with various church matters, which were the major focus of the conference, and to play down the political questions, which were important but not primary.

Ecclesiastical Questions

3. Discussions during the assembly revolved in large part around internal reforms and liturgical matters. Certain liturgical questions, such as the baptismal ritual and the mass, were considered important items in the conference's agenda, as the Vatican had left decisions in these matters to each country's church. The modifications approved in the CNBB Statutes represent the second major reform of the Statutes since the CNBB's founding in 1952. The first revisions were in 1964, immediately following the Vatican II Council. Besides allowing laymen greater participation in church affairs, the revisions will decentralize the church a bit by giving greater importance and autonomy to the fourteen Pastoral regions of Brazil. The purpose is to make the church more responsive to the particular circumstances that prevail in any one region.

4. After the discussion of the role of the laity had been closed, a group of 200 laymen from various parts of the country presented the CNBB with a document demanding that the church make a public statement on certain problems, such as "abusive experiments with the liturgy" and, especially, Marxist influences within the church. Cardinal Agnelo Rossi stated that, although the document had arrived too late for consideration at the assembly, it would be sent to the proper organ for study and reply. Considerable time was spent also on the education and formation of priests in consequence of guidelines received from the Vatican.

5. Actual decisions on all these matters were made by voting through multiple-choice questionnaires which all participants received. The objective of these discussions and decisions seemed to be an attempt to up-date the church and to make it more effective within the conditions that exist in Brazil today. In the beginning of the Pastoral Letter the bishops mention that the church has been going through a crisis in the last few years but must not be left behind by the changes taking place in the world. The church must also change. There are aspects, however, that are not subject to transformation, as they are an integral part of what the church stands for.

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The Torture Issue

6. When the conference began, it appeared that there would be little official contact between the bishops and the government. A request by Dom Helder Camara (Archbishop of Olinda and Recife) for an audience with President Medici was turned down, although this is more indicative of the government's attitude toward Dom Helder, a strong critic of the government, than toward the CNBB. Later during the conference, however, this situation changed: President Medici received almost one hundred bishops who made a courtesy call at Planalto Palace; Minister of Justice Alfredo Ruizaid met with a small group; and the President hosted a lunch at the end of the 11-day assembly which included dignitaries from CNBB, the Eucharistic Congress, and the government.

7. There was, moreover, much unannounced contact resulting from indications that the conference might issue a strong statement on torture. When it appeared that the bishops were considering such a statement, the government began to lobby among the participants in order to make its views clearly known and to convince the bishops that it was interested in dialogue and cooperation with the church. Colonel Manso Neto from SNI and Colonel Otavio Costa from Public Relations in the Presidency had various conversations with assembly leaders. Moreover, some church leaders were houseguests of government leaders during the assembly, undoubtedly opening another channel of contact. All these efforts helped to prevent a document more critical of the government than that which resulted but were unsuccessful in preventing any statement at all.

8. After the first discussions among the bishops, there was considerable debate on 1) whether to issue any statement and 2), in the case of such a declaration, what to say. A group of liberal bishops proposed a draft which criticized the government for use of torture regardless of reasons and justifications. The vote within the group studying the matter was 12-12. Dom Vicente Scherer (Archbishop of Porto Alegre) offered to cast the tie-breaking vote as chairman of the assembly in the absence of Cardinal Agostino Rossi, who had not yet arrived. Knowing that Dom Vicente would vote against the proposal, Bishop Clemente Izard (Nova Iguaçu) challenged his right to cast the vote, which, although allowed by custom, is not in the regulations. Izard was supported by Dom Ivo Lorscheider (Auxiliary Bishop of Porto Alegre), Dom Jose Lamartine Suarez (Auxiliary Bishop of Olinda and Recife), Dom Valdir Calheiros (Bishop of Volta Redonda). The vote thus remained a tie.

9. This incident led Scherer to propose a conciliatory draft expressing concern with torture, but softening the wording by stating that the church had also committed errors in the past and saying that social justice could not be obtained through methods such as torture and terrorism. The liberals objected to the mention of terrorism, as that would give the government the opportunity to justify any of its actions by saying that terrorism created an extraordinary situation that called for extraordinary means to combat it. At this point, they agreed to submit the draft to the Eucharistic Congress following the CNBB assembly for its consideration and possible dissemination.

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10. The Pastoral Letter which was published indicates that the bishops subsequently worked out a compromise, thus mentioning terrorism and torture together and balancing what could be taken as criticism of the government with support in certain areas. After condemning violence in any form, the Letter mentions that injustices have been committed in Brazil and that torture seems to have taken place in certain cases. It is up to the government to investigate such cases in depth in order to clear Brazil's name and to reassure the Brazilian people. The statement continues that, even if cases of torture are proved, it would be difficult to consider them part of official policy. In the next paragraph, the bishops condemn all torture in any part of the world. The document praises the government for its efforts in economic development, but it states that more emphasis should be given to the human element, that is, to social programs such as education and health. Finally, the document repudiates the campaign in other countries to accuse Brazil of genocide against the Indians. Eyewitnesses (forty missionaries were cited) disproved these charges.

11. The informal meeting between Minister of Justice Alfred Duzaid and a group of bishops turned into a rather heated discussion. When Duzaid stated that there was no proof of the existence of torture in Brazil, bishop José Pedro Costa said he had been informed of ninety-eight cases in the state of Guanabara alone, thirty of them confirmed. The Minister was also challenged on his statements concerning a link between some Dominican priests and communist leader Carlos Marighela. After these and other exchanges during the meeting, the secretary-general of CNBB, Dom Aluisio Lorscheider, decided to erase the recorded tapes of the meeting--all conference meetings are recorded--on the grounds that the encounter with Duzaid was not part of the agenda.

Campaign Against Brazil

12. After his meeting with the Bishops, the Minister read a statement to the press in which he discussed the campaign of certain foreign newspapers against Brazil. He said the campaign has three phases: 1) accusations of genocide against Brazil's Indian population; 2) allegations of dissension between the Church and the State, including religious persecution; 3) accusations of violence and torture by the government. Duzaid maintained that, after being discredited in the first two parts, the foreign press began the third set of accusations. However, even if there has been a case of torture, in a big country like Brazil one cannot generalize from an isolated fact. The Minister mentioned that the prisoners released in exchange for the kidnapped Japanese consul showed no signs of being tortured or mistreated, even though the press has said otherwise before their release.

13. Several days after the conference, Cardinal Agnello Rossi, President of the CNBB, granted an interview to the newspaper "O Estado do São Paulo", in which he answered questions on a variety of Church-related matters. When asked about the church's position on the torture issue, the Cardinal gave the same analysis of the attacks in the foreign press as that given by Buzaid, that is, there are three distinct parts to the campaign. He also said, however, that the government must give assurances that it will take measures against any torturers that are discovered, and that Brazil should make an effort to remove this black mark from its image abroad.

Church's Position

14. In all sectors of the church, conservative and liberal alike, there is deep concern with persecution of priests. The church liberals, as indicated by their actions at the assembly, would like a strong statement on the matter, criticizing the government for alleged incidents of torture of clergymen implicated with terrorists and for the detention of others without trial or stated charges. Other members of the church, such as Cardinal Agnello Rossi, would prefer to soften such criticisms and maintain some sort of dialogue and cooperation with the government as a means of protecting the church and the clergy. Cardinal Scherer, in past statements, also supported this position strongly, although he has challenged the government to prove in court charges that some bishops and priests are guilty of subversion. In his view, if due process were guaranteed, the charges could be investigated. Innocent priests would be released; guilty priests would be punished.

Reaction of Government

15. The reaction of the government to the Pastoral was to encourage favorable comment on its positive aspects, such as the bishops' willingness to work with the government for development, and little or no comment on those sections which are critical of the government. Press comments were favorable, and the government leader in the Chamber of Deputies, Deputy Raymundo Padilha, praised the document for its prudence and balance. Also indicative of the government's decision not to adopt a negative position on critical parts of the Pastoral was the normal attendance by government officials at the National Eucharistic Congress following the CNBB meeting (Brasilia 173).

16. Comment: The Pastoral Letter clearly states the Church's position at the moment is one of concern but willingness to cooperate with the government. It is difficult to assess whether the CNBB assembly has left the church more united than before. The official vote was overwhelmingly in favor of the document, but the unity may be illusory, as liberal elements wait to see what happens in the coming months.

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